



SIGNS OF THE FLESH

Daniel Rancour-Laferriere

Signs of the Flesh

AN ESSAY ON THE EVOLUTION
OF HOMINID SEXUALITY

Daniel Rancour-Laferriere

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Preface

There is something for everybody in this book. Human sexuality is a vast, fascinating, and disturbing realm. I suspect that most people approach such topics as female orgasm, penis envy, incest, the double standard, etc. with a mixture of curiosity and trepidation. Nobody is indifferent to sex.

Because of the universal human interest in sex, there is no shortage of theories on the subject. But in this book I attempt to make testable or falsifiable claims, that is, claims that are scientific in the Popperian sense (Popper 1959). I realize, though, that there is more to science than falsifiability. In order to come up with falsifiable claims, one has to speculate. There is much interdisciplinary speculation in the following pages, and many of my speculations have not been tested or perhaps are not yet testable. So the book is not science, properly speaking, but is headed in that direction. It is an essay in the etymological sense of the word.

The book is also not meant to be prescriptive. I do not advance a theory of what the relations between (and within) the sexes *should* be, now or in the future. I am only human, however, so the reader may detect now a trace of male chauvinism, now a bit of feminist tendentiousness.

I begin with female sexuality, focusing on the female orgasm. After arguing that female orgasm is a mechanism which helps a female to choose a male who is committed to her and to her offspring, I turn to the ontogenetic background of this mechanism and find that the female's experience of her father plays a crucial role. A female's ideal mate represents the devoted father in her past. But, complementarily, a male's ideal mate represents the mother in *his* past. One of the major behavioral features to emerge in hominid phylogeny has been mate-choice based on experience of the opposite-sex parent in early ontogeny. Various mechanisms have developed to prevent increasingly dependent young hominids and their increasingly attentive parents from engaging in incestuous relations, but the very inclination to incest has become the basis for adult mate-choice.

Having developed a psychoanalytically inspired notion of mating in today's hominids, I move on to the sociobiologically indispensable topic of altruism. Typically, though not necessarily consciously, a male renders altruism to a female and her offspring in order to retain access to her as a reproductive resource and to facilitate the survival of replicas of his genes in her offspring. At the same time the female — who is free of doubts as to the maternity of her offspring — is ordinarily expected to behave in a way that

gives the male some confidence of paternity of the offspring. This she can do by emitting signs of being faithful to him, such as having orgasms during intercourse with him or being a virgin upon marrying him. The altruism he renders may make it worth her while to give off such signs, even if they are false (fake orgasms, fake virginity). He, on the other hand, is also capable of pretense, and may abandon her and her offspring after having appeared to her to be a good bet for long-term altruism.

Deception is not as rampant, however, as this sociobiological scheme would lead one to believe. Love, for example, has a role to play. I argue that love is one of the major mechanisms keeping male and female 'locked' together over an extended period of time, with the advantageous result that offspring receive various kinds of altruism from two parents rather than one. I try to show that both males and females acquire the knack of loving primarily from early interaction with their mothers, roughly at the same time as they acquire their 'mother tongue.'

Love and language have much in common in my theory (e.g., baby talk can facilitate lovemaking). But language turns out to be useful for a variety of other things too. Since most languages are inherently sexist, for example, they tend to foster male control over females. At the same time the speech of females tends to be more oriented toward eliciting altruism than the speech of males. Male domination thus goes hand in hand with a perceived obligation to render altruism to females.

After reviewing the abundant evidence for a power asymmetry between the sexes, I argue that the chief sexual signifier of this asymmetry is the male organ. A man has a penis, and he typically has power. A woman does not have a penis, and she typically does not have power. When a man's penis does not function properly he is literally im-potent, without power, overwhelmed by what psychoanalysts mean by castration anxiety. And just as a woman uses her orgasms to judge whether a man is a reliable altruist for her, so too a man uses his sexual potency to judge whether the altruism he renders is compensated for in the form of power over her.

Of course, some men may not be potent with women at all, and some women may not respond sexually to men. But I attempt to show that homosexuals too have ways of rendering altruism that are profitable for their genes.

The final sections of the book deal with two somewhat symmetrical phenomena: penis-envy in the female and male envy of the female's ability to have babies. Although the evidence for penis-envy is not nearly as extensive as that for male envy of female reproductive functions, I believe nonetheless that the two envies constitute yet another mechanism for 'locking' couples together and thereby making it more likely that their offspring receive altruism of maximal quantity and quality.

As I said at the start, there is something for everybody in this book. In other words, I have little respect for the boundaries between disciplines. Sexuality enters very many areas of human life, and I did not want to lose the sexual trail no matter where it led me. More importantly, the thematic and disciplinary diversity of this book is the result of a conviction I have steadfastly held: when it comes to sexuality, no one academic discipline has cornered the market on the truth (or more scientifically, the market on falsifiable hypotheses). Every major sexual topic in this book is therefore treated from the perspectives of at least three different disciplines: psychoanalysis, semiotics, and evolutionary biology. More often than not other perspectives are considered as well: physiological-anatomical, experimental psychological, sociological, paleontological, anthropological, linguistic, etc.

Most of the literature on human sexuality is of a narrowly specialized nature. This is to be expected, given the vastness of the subject. What bothers me is the academic provincialism that specialization fosters. Most of the psychoanalytic work, for example, displays an ignorance of neo-Darwinian evolutionary paradigms. Most Darwinians, on the other hand, have hardly the faintest idea of what psychoanalysis is all about. But Darwinians and Freudians stand to learn a lot about sexuality from one another. Likewise, psychologists can learn something from specialists in sexual folklore, anthropologists can profit from research on reproductive physiology, and so on.

In a word, I think the specialists in human sexuality need to communicate with one another, and a purpose of this book is to encourage such communication.

I cannot of course assume that any one reader has a knowledge of the diverse fields which are here brought to bear on human sexuality. Accordingly, I have provided some "Preliminaries" (pp. 1-62) which will help the reader get acquainted with basic concepts and terms in each relevant discipline. Specialists can without loss skip over those introductory sections that deal with their own discipline. The general or lay reader, on the other hand, will probably want to risk the tedium of reading all the "Preliminaries" before tackling *Signs of the Flesh* proper.

Some portions of this book appeared in earlier versions in the following journals: *Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Thought*, *Journal of Social and Biological Structures*, *Versus: quaderni di studi semiotici*, *Ars semeiotica*, and *Academe*.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge the assistance I received from many people while writing. Most important to me were the comments of someone who will be referred to as "my lawyer" in the text. She is Barbara A. Milman, who is in fact an attorney specializing in the investigation of political corrup-

tion, and who is therefore uniquely qualified to advise me on the sexual politics described in this book. Special thanks also go to Paul D. MacLean who has been encouraging my excursions into theoretical biology for some years now. Donald Symons and Michael Ruse provided very useful socio-biological comments. Allen Jossey-Bass and Thomas Sebeok deserve thanks for their good advice on publishing matters. Others to whom I am grateful for constructive oral and/or written criticism include: Richard Alexander, Robert Amorcho, Steve Armstrong, Glen Clark, Brett Cooke, Martha Cornog, Lucy Day, Gonzalo Diaz-Migoyo, Alan Dundes, Susan Erickson, H. J. Eysenck, Brand Frentz, Jim Gallant, Lynette Geyer, Ben Hart, Gordon W. Hewes, Bob Hopkins, Seymour Howard, Simon Karlinsky, Mary Keller, Melvin Konner, Karl Menges, Sarah Meyers, George Munro, Peter Richerson, Janet Shibamoto, and Harvey Wheeler. Faye Vierra of Shields Library helped me obtain some of the more obscure articles and books on human sexuality which are listed in my bibliography. Gay Baldwin and Heinz Fenkl made cogent comments even as they typed the manuscript. Finally, I appreciate the three successive years of faculty research grants which were provided by the University of California at Davis.

D. Rancour-Laferriere

February, 1985
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Signs of the Flesh

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Preliminaries

A. Minimal Semiotics

One of the fields which potentially has much to offer to an understanding of human sexuality is semiotics. I will limit the discussion to only the barest bones of current semiotic theory. For further, more technical treatises the reader may wish to consult: Eco 1976; Silverstein 1976; Sebeok 1976b; Chomsky 1979. Those with great patience and a bent for highly abstract reasoning will find rewarding the *Collected Papers* (1965-66) of the great American pioneer in logic and semiotics, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914).

Semiotics is not an easy thing to define. Some say it is a fad. They are correct, but it is not only a fad. Some say it is a field. But it is really too early to support such a claim. Some say it is a fraud. But who would seriously believe that there exists an international conspiracy to perpetrate fraudulent scholarship?

Semiotics is not new. It may be a fad, but it is not new. It is in fact an old topic which, having lain dormant for centuries, is now receiving new vigor. It goes back at least as far as a gentleman of the Stoic persuasion named Chrysippus, who lived during the third century before the birth of Christ.

One of the things the Stoics were interested in was how the world is represented by human beings to other human beings. According to the Stoics, representations of objects and events in the world are *signs*. Semiotics is the study of signs, i.e., of those entities which effect communication between interpreters of signs. Quite a variety of things can function as signs. A word, a sentence, a gesture, a facial expression, a photograph, a diagram, etc., are all signs because we, their interpreters, are more concerned with what they stand for or represent than with what they are merely in themselves. Semiotics thus does not study any particular thing — the way a mineralogist, for example, studies specifically rocks and minerals, or a biologist studies specifically living organisms — rather, semiotics studies a wide variety of things, but only insofar as they enter into a relationship in which they stand for something else.

The Stoics seem to have been the first to invent a terminology for the

various events and processes which take place when something is used to stand for something else. Perhaps the most interesting is the Stoic notion of *lekton*, which basically refers to the hidden process which must take place in an interpreter when one thing (*sēmaion*) is understood to take the place of or represent another thing (*tugchanon*). This process permits the interpreter to make what would otherwise (in a nonsemiotic situation) be the absurd assumption that one thing somehow *is* another thing. Evidently the Stoics thought of the *lekton* as a quite concrete or physical process, however hidden from direct view. It was definitely not an idea or concept. The noted neurophysiologist Warren McCulloch put it, "what's in the brain is the Stoic *lekton*" (1965, 390).

This latter claim, which is of a type that tends to horrify professors of philosophy, pretty accurately represents what is happening at one segment of the leading edge of semiotics today. Researchers into the problem of aphasia, for example, have been able to make some very specific correlations between defects in the use of *verbal signs* and lesions in brain tissue (e.g., Geschwind 1970; below, section 33). Or, to take a *nonverbal sign*, it has been found that display of the erect penis, which is a sign of dominance and aggression in such primates as squirrel monkeys, is controlled by very precisely specifiable brain areas (MacLean 1973a). Such specifically neuro-behavioral discoveries as these are important to the semiotician, though they are often made by researchers who have no particular interest in the theory of signs. Indeed a wide variety of researchers — neurologists, linguists, ethologists, anthropologists, sociobiologists, psychologists, philosophers, literary theoreticians, language pedagogues, and others — are constantly finding out things that are relevant to semiotics. Just as a medical researcher interested in a cure for cancer might make a real contribution to theoretical biology, or the biographer of a novelist might stumble on some important fact for the literary scholar who studies the works of that novelist, so too a scholar engaged in some not particularly semiotic enterprise might discover something of direct relevance to semiotics. The difference is that semioticians seem to practice this kind of "parasitism" more extensively than do other kinds of scholars, especially since the academic scene today is compartmentalized in such a way as usually to exclude a specifically semiotic compartment (for more on the politics of semiotics in American academia, see Laferrière 1979).

The proper object of semiotic scrutiny is the sign. Colors, for example, can be signs. Biologists know that the perceived green color of a leaf is in some sense a "sign" of chlorophyll in the leaf. Chemists know that the blue color of litmus in some sense "signifies" an alkaline solution. Astronomers know that a red shift in the spectrum of light emanating from a star is in

some sense a "sign" that the star is moving away. But biologists, chemists, astronomers, and various other scientists are "semioticians" only in a rather banal meaning of the word. The relationships these scientists study can perfectly well exist without them, i.e., without interpreters to semiotinize such relationships.

Not so with the relationships studied by the professional semiotician. The latter is interested in the functioning of signs in an interpreter (or interpreters) other than himself (unless he is studying himself objectively, as another interpreter). Thus, for example, a semiotician might study how biologists make connections between the colors of leaves and their notions of the chemicals in the leaves. That is, it is possible to do a semiotics of scientific interpretation. More commonly, however, the semiotician studies signs that are imputed within a complex cultural code rather than signs which result from scientific discoveries. Thus a semiotician might take an interest in how the color green came to be associated with the command "go!" at a traffic intersection. Or he may try to determine how and why green came to represent the psychological state of envy in English (cf. Russian, which uses green to represent fury instead, as in "On pozelenel ot zlosti" ["He turned green with fury"]). Or he might become interested in why so many of the characters portrayed in Chagall's paintings have green faces (*I and the Village*, *The Poet*, *Jew in Green*, *The Green Violinist*, etc.).

The essential ingredient in the semiotician's studies, as opposed to the studies of a biologist, a chemist, etc., is the interpreter. Whereas light of a wavelength perceivable as green is related to chlorophyll, whether or not the biologist is present, such light does not signify "go!" at a traffic intersection unless there is an interpreter present behind the wheel of an automobile entering that intersection. No semiosis takes place in the absence of an interpreter. The tree falls in the forest whether or not an interpreter is present, but the fall does not *signify* anything without an interpreter. Semiotics, then, is not merely the study of signs, but is the study of how interpreters actualize the many potential semiotic relationships that exist in the universe.

If semiotic theory is going to be applied specifically to the subject of human sexuality, a few terminological clarifications first have to be made. But this is not an easy thing to do, given the exceedingly complex history of semiotic theorizing across a number of different cultures and languages — from the Stoics, the Medieval Schoolmen, Locke, Peirce, de Saussure, Morris, and a number of other historical figures right down to the present-day babel of terminologies emanating from the Soviet semioticians, the Parisian Left-Bank school, the American neo-Peirceans, etc. To be frank, much of what passes for "semiotics" today is unfalsifiable fluff, and not at all what E.O. Wilson called it in his famous introduction to sociobiology, i.e., "the *scientific*

study of communication" (1975, 594, emphasis added). I therefore intend to use semiotic terminology very sparingly, and to recur to just a few very simple but important and widely accepted semiotic notions such as:

- 1) A *sign* is anything that can be used to stand for or represent something else — *aliquid stat pro aliquo*, in the transparent formulation of the Medieval Schoolmen.
- 2) A sign that stands for something else by reason of a perceived similarity is termed an *icon*. Examples: drawings, photographs, diagrams, imitative gestures, onomatopoeic words.
- 3) A sign that stands for something else because of some relationship of existential contiguity to that something else is termed an *index*. Examples: the act of pointing, use of past tense, use of words such as "here," "there," personal pronouns, etc.
- 4) A sign that stands for something else purely by convention is a *symbol*. Examples: most of the words in language (including nouns, adjectives, verbs minus tense, pronouns minus indexicality, etc.).
- 5) In much of the semiotic literature a sign is understood to be the union of both that which does the signifying (called a *signifier* [cf. Latin *signans*, French *signifiant*]) and that which is signified (called the *signified* [cf. Latin *signatum*, French *signifié*]). I will simply use the English terminology — signifier vs. signified — and will sometimes use "sign" interchangeably with "signifier".
- 6) The entity which is responsible for relating the signifier to the signified is called the *interpreter*. In this book the interpreters of primary interest will be evolving hominids, including humans.
- 7) The internal (i.e., mental or neurophysiological) correlates of the signifier and signified in the interpreter will not be of much concern in this book, though they do exist and probably have been acted upon by natural selection in the course of hominid evolution. For example, if a woman perceives her mate as an icon of her father, then there must have been internal schemata (the Stoic *lecta*?; the neurologist's cell assemblies or holographic juncture patterns?) which have been selected for to produce such a perception in significant numbers of females.

The professional semiotician will of course recognize that I have made some extreme simplifications here, and have left out much. However, Peirce's fundamental trichotomy of icon/index/symbol is still recognizable, as is Saussure's dyadic conception of the sign. When necessary — e.g., when I attempt to relate linguistic complexities to human sexuality — more terms will be introduced. Otherwise I will proceed with a minimal load of semiotic vocabulary.

B. The Evolutionary Perspective

Semiotics can be a big help for understanding human sexuality as it exists today, but today's sexuality is only one result of several million years of progressive biological (and eventually cultural) change in the hominid line. An evolutionary as well as a semiotic perspective is necessary for understanding how today's hominids engage in sexual relationships.

Various components of hominid sexual behavior, including sexual signs, had to have been under the influence of natural selection over long periods of geologic time. At the very least natural selection has insured that sexual behavior took place in our hominid ancestors — else we obviously would not be here. Genital sexuality, in other words, is at least partially under the control of genes, though such an assertion also implies partial control by environmental circumstances in the development (ontogeny) of the individual as well.

This brings up the old problem of genes vs. environment (“nature vs. nurture”). No evolutionist believes that a gene completely “determines” a structure or function, because every single structure and function in an organism, no matter how “close” to genes, exists in an environment, including the remaining structures and functions of the organism itself. Thus a standard textbook on evolutionary theory defines evolution in terms of both genes and environment: “organic evolution is a series of partial or complete and irreversible transformations of the genetic composition of populations, based principally on altered interactions with their environment” (Dobzhansky *et al.* 1977, 8).

Sociobiology is a form of evolutionary biology that has recently elicited some sharp debate on the gene/environment dichotomy. Sociobiologists like to say that various social behaviors are “determined” by genes. For example, the leading spokesman for sociobiology today, E. O. Wilson, speaks of the genes which “determine” altruistic or beneficent acts in humans (1976, 342). To this Ashley Montagu objects:

But do genes “determine” altruistic acts? They may do so in insects on which Wilson is an authority, but as an anthropologist I consider it more than doubtful that they do so in humans. Surely, common experience tells us that some individuals are quite incapable of an altruistic act, and that variability in this is as great as it is in any other human behavior?

... as Harlow and his co-workers have shown, monkeys who have been isolated or inadequately socialized are, in later life, altogether wanting in anything resembling a capacity for altruistic behavior. The same is true of humans who

have suffered similar deprivations in infancy and childhood. That altruistic behavior has a genetic basis I have not the least doubt. I have repeatedly set out the evidence for this, and it has recently been confirmed in babies and infants whose altruistic behavior has long been known to some if not to others. What is, however, clear is that environmental factors play a decisive role in determining whether such behaviors will be developed or not. (1980, pp. 6-7).

But this is sheer misunderstanding of sociobiology on Montagu's part. Thinking that he is rebutting a central argument of sociobiology, he is in fact restating what sociobiologists say. He is granting that genes are a necessary but not sufficient condition for human altruism. Environmental factors are also crucial. Yet any evolutionary biologist, including a sociobiologist, will grant the importance of environment in the development of something that is "determined" by genes. Contrary to what Burian (1981-2, 49) says, sociobiology can have "bite" and still permit the environment to play a decisive role: "... if sociobiology is to be of any general interest, it must maintain that the behaviors it studies are rather tightly controlled by the genetic constitution of the organism under investigation" (*ibid.*, 62). This statement is false because 1) sociobiology, judging from the proliferation of publications alone, has proven to be of "general interest," and 2) it has done so without, in the majority of instances, claiming that behaviors are "tightly controlled" by genes (cf. Hardin 1978, 185).

What could be more genetically "determined," for example, than the structure of the human eye? Yet that structure can be modified to the point of blindness if there just happens to be an overabundance of oxygen in the *environment* of the newborn child. Or, to take an example more relevant to the subject matter of this book: the ejaculation of semen from the penis is something that is obviously "programmed" to occur when the erect penis is in the vagina, yet there are in fact quite a few contextual and developmental circumstances that prevent ejaculation from occurring in a vagina (see section 45, below).

Everything about an organism develops only within certain environmental limits. What Montagu and other anti-sociobiologists (e.g., Sayers 1982, ch. 4) tend to overlook is something sociobiologists and psychologists studying human evolution call "prepared" (or "primed") learning (e.g., Seligman and Hager 1972; Wilson 1978), or what ethologists call "a faculty to acquire" (see Reynolds 1981, 22). Human altruism, for example, is "primed" by the genes in such a way that the human organism (in significant numbers, and in a typical environment for ontogeny) is following the path of least selective resistance in developing altruistic traits.¹ Put differently, altruistic features

1. As Alexander (1979b, 120) points out, Wilson is occasionally guilty of playing down

may be controlled by an “open” genetic program (cf. Mayr 1982, 598-99). Some individuals may in fact do little to benefit others at their own personal expense, but the sociobiologists argue that it is in part genes that prevent such things from happening in uncharacteristically large numbers (see Alexander 1979b, 89ff. and Pulliam and Dunford 1980 for particularly clear discussions of the heritability versus learnability of traits).

Another controversial topic raised by the evolutionists is adaptation. As I see it, to take an evolutionary approach to human sexuality is, among other things, to be inclined to look for the adaptive value of observable sexual behaviors and attitudes. In other words: how might a given sexual trait in the present possibly have resulted from natural selection in the past? Darwin of course did not believe that natural selection was the *only* means whereby organisms change over geologic time. As Gould and Lewontin have shown (1984 [1978]), there are alternatives to the “adaptationist programme” in evolutionary biology. One can, for example, attempt to explain a given instance of change as due to genetic drift, allometrical correlation, phenotypic plasticity, or some other non-selective process. But Darwin did believe that natural selection was the *main* means of evolutionary modification, and I think it especially useful to ask how a cross-culturally typical sexual trait *might* have been produced by natural selection. There may not necessarily be an answer to the question. But the question itself can lead to considerations that might otherwise not have been raised. Also, in many cases the question is worthwhile if only because it is being asked for the first time. For example, no one has apparently ever thought about castration anxiety in adaptationist terms before. This is true not only because evolutionists tend to be ignorant of psychoanalysis, but also because the subject matter itself is quite repulsive. It is difficult to have a theory — never mind an adaptationist theory — about something that tends to be unthinkable. It behooves the scholar of human sexual evolution to ask again and again: Am I abandoning the search for an adaptive explanation of feature X because the explanation is inherently unwarranted, or because I would just rather not have to think about feature X? Trying to understand why men have such powerful feelings about their own penises is not quite the same thing as trying to explain the zig-zag commissures of clams.

developmental processes which “prime” an organism in the direction of a behavioral trait as much as genes do. In other words, Wilson’s practice is not always perfectly consistent with what, ideally, sociobiology ought to be (cf. Barkow 1980, 178). I would not (nor would Alexander) throw out the sociobiological baby with this particular wash, however — any more than I would throw out psychoanalysis because Freud did not always follow certain ideals of psychoanalysis.